

Korrin in the Deep

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I wake to darkness and the taste of stone dust.

For a moment—a single, merciful moment—I don't remember where I am. Then the weight presses down, the cold seeps in, and memory returns like a brother-in-law at dinnertime: unwelcome and impossible to ignore.

Right. The tunnel. The ceiling crack I waved off because I was *so close*—just a few more feet to the old vein, the one Brandel had been working when the mountain swallowed him whole. The groan that sounded like the earth clearing its throat. The breath of air that smelled like a closed coffin. And then the world came down with all the subtlety of divine judgment.

"Well, Korrin," I mutter into the dark, "you've really outdone yourself this time."

The mountain doesn't answer. Rude, considering it just tried to kill me.

I try to move and discover I'm pinned better than a butterfly in a collector's case. Right leg under a slab of granite that weighs more than my mother-in-law's disappointment. Left arm wedged against my ribs. I can wiggle my fingers—small mercy—and turn my head just enough to see absolutely nothing. The kind of black that isn't absence but *presence*. The dark has weight here. Has opinions.

My lantern's gone. Smashed or buried, doesn't matter which. The oil smell lingers like a lying promise.

"Right then," I say to no one, because talking to yourself in the dark is either madness or survival, and I'm not picky. "Let's see what we're working with."

My body's mostly intact—battered, bruised, bleeding somewhere I can't see, but alive. That's something. My hammer's still strapped to my belt. "Hello, Ironjaw," I pat the handle. "Fancy meeting you here." Fat lot of good she'll do me, but it's nice to know I'm not completely alone. There's a waterskin just out of reach, half-full by the weight of it. I could stretch for it if I don't mind my ribs having strong opinions about the decision. And I've got air. Not much, but enough. For now.

What I've lost: light, freedom, any chance of digging myself out, and—if I'm honest—most of my dignity.

I've been a miner for forty years. Know stone the way a weaver knows thread, the way a mother knows her child's cry in a crowd. Can read a seam, smell a fault line, feel the mountain's mood in my bones. And I *still* walked into this trap like a green apprentice with more pride than his grandfather's beard.

"Should've waited," I tell the darkness. It sounds like Merra, my wife. Feels like her too—stern, loving, absolutely right. "Should've brought the crew. Should've listened."

But I didn't. Because this wasn't about ore or silver or anything you could spend.

My brother. Dead three years now, buried somewhere in the deep when the old Northshaft collapsed. They never found his body. Never got to lay him proper, with stone and song and the words we say when a delver goes home to the earth.

I thought—fool that I am—I could find him. Or at least find the place he fell. Say the words myself. Close the wound.

Instead, I've opened a new one.

The air is already thicker than it should be. I can feel it in my lungs, the way each breath takes more effort than the last. The mountain is patient. It doesn't need to crush me. It can just wait.

I close my eyes—not that it makes a difference in the dark—and try not to think about Merra. About how she begged me not to go alone. About the look on her face when I kissed her forehead and promised I'd be back by supper.

Supper.

I wonder if she's worried yet. If she's sent someone to look. If they'll even know where to start.

The thought sits in my chest like a stone.

Time moves strangely in the dark. Could be minutes. Could be hours. Could be next Tuesday for all I know. The pain in my leg has gone from sharp to dull to something worse—a cold, creeping numbness that whispers *too late, too late* in a voice that sounds suspiciously like my old master, who never liked me much.

I try to dig with my free hand. Scrabble at the rocks pinning my leg, my arm. "Come on, you stubborn—" But every stone I move, two more shift down like they're taking turns. The mountain's got a sense of humor after all. Dark one, but still.

I stop before I bring the whole ceiling down on my head. Wouldn't want to be greedy.

My throat is dry. I stretch toward the waterskin, fingers brushing the strap, ribs shrieking. I get it. Take a sip. The water tastes like copper and dust, but it's cold and real and for a moment I remember what it's like to be alive.

I think about praying.

Haven't done that in a while. Not since Brandel died. Not since I stood at the mouth of the collapsed Northshaft and shouted at the Maker for taking him, for not stopping the stone, for letting good men die in the dark.

But down here, with the weight pressing and the air thinning and nothing left to do, I find the words coming anyway.

I'm here. I'm still here. Please.

Not eloquent. Not the kind of prayer the priests would approve of. But it's all I have.

I wait.

Nothing.

Just the silence of the deep, the slow drip of water somewhere far off, the rasp of my own breathing.

I think about Brandel. Wonder if this is what it was like for him. The dark, the wait, the slow surrender. Did he call out? Did he pray? Did anyone hear?

My hand finds Ironjaw. I pull her free from my belt, feel the weight of her, the worn leather grip smooth under my palm like an old friend's handshake. She's been with me since I was a journeyman—sunk a thousand shafts, built half the forges in the valley, and once, memorably, defended my lunch from a very determined badger.

"Well, old girl," I murmur, "not much use for driving nails down here, are we?"

And then the thought arrives, slow as dawn creeping over a ridgeline.

The old signal codes.

The ones we used when the tunnels got too deep for voices, when the only way to talk was through stone itself. Tap-patterns. Rhythms that carried meaning across the dark: *danger*, *help*, *here*, and—my personal favorite—*someone bring beer*.

I don't know if anyone's close enough to hear. Don't know if anyone's even looking.

But Ironjaw and I have had a good run together. Seems a shame to quit now.

I lift her and tap the stone beside my head.

Three short. Three long. Three short.

The universal signal. The one every delver knows, the one you teach your children before they learn their letters.

Help. I'm here. Help.

"Come on," I whisper. To the mountain, to the air, to whoever might be listening in the world above. "I'm right here. I'm still here."

I tap it again. And again. And again.

My arm aches. My ribs scream. But I keep going, because it's the only thing I can do. The only thread connecting me to the world above, to light and air and the people who might—*might*—still be listening.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I'm here.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I'm still here.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Please.

I lose count of how many times I tap the pattern. My arm goes numb. My vision—not that there's anything to see—starts to swim with lights that aren't there. The air's gone thick as porridge, hard to pull into my lungs.

"Brandel," I whisper to the dark, "if you're up there somewhere, put in a good word for me, would you? Tell them your idiot brother's down here being an idiot."

I'm so tired.

Ironjaw slips from my hand, clatters against stone. The sound echoes once, twice, then fades into nothing.

I let my head fall back and think: *This is it. This is how it ends. Alone in the dark, just like you, brother. At least we'll match.*

And then—

A sound.

Faint. Far off. But *there*.

Tap. Tap-tap. Tap.

My heart does something complicated in my chest.

"No," I breathe. "No, that's not—you're hearing things, Korrin. Losing your mind down here—"

But it comes again, clearer this time. Closer.

Tap-tap. Tap. Tap-tap.

We hear you. Hold on.

I scramble for Ironjaw with shaking fingers. "Did you hear that?" I ask her, because apparently I've fully committed to madness now. "They heard us. Someone *heard us*."

I tap back, frantic, desperate, laughing and crying and I don't even care anymore.

Yes. Yes. I'm here. I'm HERE.

The reply comes again, clearer this time. Closer.

Tap-tap. Tap. Tap-tap.

We hear you. Hold on.

And then—voices. Muffled, but real. The sound of picks striking stone. The mountain groaning as they break through.

I start to laugh, or maybe cry. Can't tell the difference anymore.

"Here!" I rasp, though I don't know if they can hear me. "I'm here!"

The picks get louder. Faster. And then—

Light.

Blinding, beautiful, impossible light, spilling through a crack in the rubble above me.

I squint against it, tears streaming, and see faces. Dwarven faces. Bearded, grim, determined. Hands reaching, pulling at the stone, widening the gap.

"Korrin!" someone shouts. "Hold on, lad. We've got you."

They dig. They pull. They lift the slab off my leg—agony, white-hot, but I don't care because I can *move*—and strong hands grip my arms, haul me up through the gap into air that tastes like rain and sky and everything I thought I'd lost.

I collapse onto solid ground, gasping, shaking, alive.

Someone wraps a cloak around me. Someone else presses a flask to my lips—water, cold and clean. I drink and cough and drink again.

"How—" I manage. "How did you find me?"

"The Shepherd," one of the dwarves says. A grey-beard I don't recognize. "Young lad tending his flock on the hillside. Said he put his ear to the ground and heard tapping. Came running to the guildhall, wouldn't stop until we listened."

I look around, searching for the boy. But he's not here. Just the dwarves, their faces lit by lanterns, their hands still dusty from digging.

"Where is he?" I ask.

The grey-beard shrugs. "Gone. Didn't give his name. Just said someone was trapped and we had to hurry."

I lean back against the stone, stare up at the sky—grey and overcast, the most beautiful thing I've ever seen—and feel something crack open in my chest.

Not because I survived.

Because someone *heard*.

A boy I've never met, who had no reason to care, who could've ignored the faint tapping beneath his feet and gone about his day. But he didn't. He listened. He came. He brought help.

I think of Brandel. Think of all the times I asked the Maker *why* he didn't save my brother, why he let the mountain take him.

And now I'm lying here, pulled from the deep by grace I didn't earn, by a rescue I couldn't buy, by a Shepherd who heard me when I couldn't save myself.

I don't have words for it. Don't have explanations.

All I have is this:

I was lost. And I was found.

I couldn't save myself. But I wasn't left alone.

The grey-beard claps me on the shoulder. "Come on, Korrin. Let's get you home."

Home.

Merra's face flashes in my mind. The way she'll cry and hold me and probably hit me for being such a fool.

I can't wait.

They help me to my feet—my leg's broken, but it'll mend—and we start the long walk down the mountain. Behind us, the hole in the earth yawns dark and silent, already filling with shadow.

But I'm not in it anymore.

I'm here. In the light. In the air.

Alive.

And somewhere out there, a Shepherd tends his flock, listening for the lost.